New Fiction in Varied Forms

HOAX. By Anonymous. George H. Doran Company.

THE author of this is well inspired in his choice of anonymity and in his title. The book is intentionally enigmatic, and one suspects the writer of subterfuge beyond his confession. The story purports to be the vision of a very modern young man, as seen by his middle aged father, an observer from the point of view of the middle fifties. But he is not wholly convincing as a father, or as one past the half century mark. Much of his analysis of the young man rather suggests autobiography; the critical reflections of, let us guess, the late thirties, instead of the more detached appraisal of an elder. Not that that matters greatly, and guesses may easily go far of the mark. The more important fact is that the book is persistently "intriguing," altogether an extraordinary performance, though not wholly or unqualifiedly a success.

Its chief drawback is that there is a little too much of it, producing something of a strain. It is definitely posed, and one feels that the model is holding the difficult position a little too long. He does hold it, but one is a bit relieved when the sitting is over and all hands, including the reader, are allowed to relax. The thing is, after all, a *tour de force;* its point could have been made more effective in two-thirds or less of its length.

The story deals with the love affairs or philanderings of a peculiarly self-centered young man: outwardly unusual, yet possibly not so much so as might at first be thought. Eugene's vacillations and half comic, half tragic uncertainties and eccentricities are not unique or really bizarre experiences. It may be that many, if not most, young folk are more nearly capable of Eugene's antics than they are of the traditional "grand passion" or the single-minded romantic devotion of the stock variety of sentimental love stories. Eugene is simply a little more clear-headed than most youngsters, and certainly more frank in his actions.

Eugene himself perpetrated a novel, which serves as the climax of the story in hand. Maybe this is it. Indeed, he almost tells us so. His novel was to be built of his own peculiar experiences with the three ladies in question, and Eugene tells us:

> After I got deep into the work I saw the possibilites, but I never forgot the farce of it. I was taking a part of myself seriously enough, but the rest of me was a joke, and the story was a huge hoax, a tremendous hoax—the greater hoax because of its nearness to truth. It had not occurred to my mind until a few days ago that it might be serious.

And the author, in his proper person, remarks in his foreword, after expressly disclaiming any exact portraiture, that "he wants to go back home some time," to the Danville of his story, the "community which knew him vaguely in his earlier youth." If he does, he may no doubt expect a warm welcome, for his portrayal of Danville is a very living affair, too much so to be flattering to local pride and prejudice.

Indeed, this background of the story is one of its finest elements: a small masterpiece of stage setting, never intrusive but always sufficiently there. It is obviously drawn from the living model, and drawn far more subtly and understandingly than are the New York, Greenwich Village and newspaper office scenes, which are no more than average good, being the impressions of an observer more or less from the inside but not wholly at home, whereas in the Southern scenes he is patently one "to the manor born."

His Danville is indefinitely of the South—not the far South; perhaps Tennessee will do as a guess. It is much the same kind of town, only a little larger, as that which Mr. T. S. Stribling has recently put so plainly on the literary map in his "Birthright," and the people of this story are the white folks of that book, only a little more sophisticated. They are living what might be called a pre-Darwinian life. The author speaks incidentally of "the ever amusing but pitifully incomplete narrative of Jonah and the whale, which I have the doubtful honor of being the only man in Danville to doubt." The church life is still important as background, and it appears here as the courting place of the very youthful Engene and Leila, the relationship which started all the trouble of the story. Also incidentally the occasional negroes who turn up, merely as local color, as part of the scenery, are much like Mr. Stribling's. If this book had nothing else to recommend it it would be worth while as showing a cross-section of that Southern society.

Eugene, then, at the age of 18, gets to "keeping company" with Leila, and such an arrangement is in that society regarded as a finality. But the old folks are worried by the apparent calm with which both Eugene and Leila take it all. He goes off to college and thence to the war, and things just drag along. But after his return he meets Mary Louise and imagines or suspects himself in love with her. He doesn't want Leila, but when another suitor turns up Eugene successfully drives him off. Thereafter comes his New York newspaper experience and the metropolitan Claudia, with whom he almost commits matrimony, being saved at the last moment by a crap game and the urge to write a novel—delightful details which the reader should ponder for himself. Of course, he ends by going back to Danville and Leila after deciding to publish the great novel anonymously—just like this one. He has fulfilled his "obligation" to Leila, and one suspects he may not find it so difficult a burden after all, since he is clearly no Pyramus for whom there is but one possible Thisbe.

It is a subtle piece of work, clever and adroit at all points, if just the least bit artificial. The key to Engene is stated definitely by his supposititious father:

> I thank God my son was born with a sense of humor. Without it he could never have borne his life. He had to have it. A consciousness of obligation which has amounted almost to a desultory fatalism may kill the flame of his brain, yet his sense of humor, outrageous as it is, has prevented that consciousness from destroying his heart and soul. And I thank God that he lives, although I fear he may be unhappy. . . .

The reader, too, will be thankful, glad to meet him, although we may not worry very greatly as to his future happiness, since the Eugenes of reality generally manage to get on pretty comfortably in spite of their share of the divine fire, which in their case is not altogether a consuming flame. HENRY WALKER.

THE LOVE STORY OF ALIETTE BRUNTON. By Gilbert Frankau. Century Company.

MR. FRANKAU has built a large layer cake of fiction in this novel. It is a coherent whole, structurally sound, rather imposing in its architecture, but readily separable into its three component parts, with a little sugared frosting of a "happy ending" on top. As usual in such confections the filling, the middle stratum, is the most interesting part of it. The whole thing makes an ample meal. It is nearly twice as large as it really needed to be, but it is nourishing.

The foundation layer is the very familiar triangle: the unhappily married woman, her cruel husband, and the noble lover, the thesis being that divorce should be easier, that the husband does not own the unwilling wife, as a slave, and that the old theory as to "whom God hath joined," &c., is out of date. "As though," the hero reflects, "humanity were any deity's stud-farm!" It works out on the usual lines; Aliette leaves her brutal husband, Hector Brunton, to live with her lover, Ronald Cavendish. But Brunton refuses to sue for a divorce, seeking revenge in their social ostracism and the ruin of Cavendish's career at the bar. It is all very well done, but, in the phrase of the late "Major Max" (which once almost caused a duel), it reminds one of the "setter pup who retrieves a last year's bird's nest." We have read it all too many times before to be greatly excited.

But then comes the filling, which is very much better. It is a fine, subtly conceived study of Ronald's mother, Mrs. Julia Cavendish, and the effect upon her of her son's unfortunate love affair. She is an intellectual woman, a famous writer, novelist and essayist, a wealthy widow in the middle sixties, devoted to her son, but still holding fast to the remnant of Victrian ideas, believing divorce to be wicked, and holding to shreds of the old religious faith. When the story opens she has just written a series of essays on the evils of divorce, and the wickedness of yielding to the sentimental impulses. Naturally the impact of her son's scandalous affair is tremendous. At first she quarrels with him, but it gradually dawns upon her that she has been wrong in her beliefs and that Ronald and Aliette are "courageous," justified and entitled to full social and legal sanction. So she decides to come to their help.

Mr. Frankau's presentation of old Julia is admirable, at all points, even to the somewhat bizarre outcome of her growth. For when all else fails to move the savage husband to sue, Julia decides to make a novel out of the case and bludgeon him into action by publicity. Her health is broken, but she manages to finish the book before her death, and also to create singular complications in her will, the details of which may be left to the reader's curiosity. The thing is a striking piece of characterization; sympathetically understanding and brilliant in execution.

But then comes the top layer, which is sheer melodrama, involving a murder trial, astonishing resemblances, perjured evidence and a whole movie scenario. This, too, is excellently worked out along its own lines, to good, if very stagey effects. It even involves the burning of the will and other antiquated stage devices. This section is crude, but vigorous enough. It leads to the inevitable epilogue of a promise of future happiness for the eloping couple and their baby. Mr. Frankau explicitly states his thesis:

> The Aliettes of England! The women whose sole excuse for matehood is love! There are half a million such in Great Britain today: Women whose only crime is that, craving happiness, they have taken their happiness in definace of some male. They are of all classes, our Aliettes. You will find them alike in our West End and in our slums. . . . Sometimes their own strength, sometimes death, sometimes money, sometimes the clemency of their legal owners sets them free. But, for the most part, they live in outlawry.

There is also a queer side-light upon changing conditions in social London to-day in the suggestion that if Julia and Aliette and Ronald had been a little less obstreperous in their position they might have done well enough, socially, without any divorse. He tells us—

> Social London, you see, was in a state of moral flux. Cadogan Square, Belgravia, and Knightsbridge still clung rigidly to the tenets of the Victorian past. But for Mayfair, parts of Kensington, and the more artistic suburbs, matrimonial issues had assumed a new aspect since the war. Actually a tide of freer thinking on the sex question had begun to sweep over the whole of England. Happiness had not yet come to be acknowledged the only possible basis of monogamy, but divorce reform was no longer only in the air—it was more or less on the table of the house.

Despite its patent artistic faults, in its redundancy and occasional lapses into sensationalism, the book is steadily interesting, and of some significance as a study of changing social conditions. Mr. Frankau is always a forceful writer, and it should be added that there is no taint of lasciviousness, no leer in this story. It holds nothing for the "smut hound," and is nowhere vulgar or cheap in that direction.

H. L. PANGBORN.

INDELIBLE. By Elliot H. Paul. Houghton Mifflin Company.

MR. PAUL is the victim of an idea that was too big for him. He had a very large opportunity in the plan of this novel, the subtitle of which calls it a "story of life, love and music in five movements," but, in an old New England phrase that would have been familiar to the elder folk of the first "movement" of this symphony, he has "bitten off more'n he can chew." The result is a striking book, with many very fine and unusual things about it, a book that may very well attract wide attention and comment, but one that nevertheless can hardly be called an artistic success. Instead of being comprehensive, as it pretends to be, it remains narrow; instead of being dramatically impressive it is theatrical. Mr. Paul's vision is sometimes penetrating, but more often it is astigmatic. The result is a distortion. The book is ambitious enough, and

Continued on Following Page.